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THE SISTER ATHANASIA. By H. M. Robinson

SITTING in Father Geron's little parlor, and looking dreamily through the window, past the neat white chapel buried in the pines and birches, to the broad expanse of the White-Horse Plains beyond, shimmering in the fervid heat of a June day, I am roused by the voice of the father resuming the thread of a discourse which, I fancied, had died out and been forgotten in the languor and silence of the past half-hour.

"Yes," he says, meditatively, in his broken English, "conscien', that is the bez guide, ain't id? I am a *Catholique*, you is a *schismatique*; I thing the confezion is right, an' you thing it is hall wrong. Well, then, I go ad confezion an' ged some res'; you go an' ged honly disturb'; *mais* 'tis a matt' of conscien' wid us both the same. For you id h'would be a sin, *mais* for me id is hall right. A man he muz nod go again' his conscien'."

When, without altering my position, I languidly assent to the father's proposition, he continues:

"Rilligion is a very strange. I know one time a man, he thing it was wrong to hear the music of the vesper. When I ask him what is the matt', he say, 'Tis me conscien'—me rilligion; every man muz have the rilligion he like the bez.' Well, then, thad man—he was the moz funny man thad I never see—he l'v'n to play hon the horgan, and he comes ad the vesper every Sunday evening. After some time he say, 'Where I'm goin' to fin' one priest to make me 'appy like dat?' an' he makes one *Catholique* of hisself, jus' for the music. Yass, an' he go ad the confezion, too!"

As if in unison with the father's monologue, there come floating in at the window, with the droning of the bees, the rustle of leaves, the scent of flowers, and the songs of birds in the birch-trees, the first plain-

tive notes of the vesper-hymn. The exquisite strains, softened by distance and chastened by the accompaniment of Nature's divine harmonies abroad in the air, fill the little room with a volume of sweetest sound; now a plaintive, entreating chord, like the feeble utterance of a despairing yet hopeful soul; again, an impassioned fullness, mounting upward like a whirlwind, and seeking to storm the very gates of heaven in its defiant yet triumphant melodies. For a moment we sit drinking in the strains, unwilling to mar the sombre yet delightful effects by speech or motion; then Father Geron slowly rises, and, donning his *soutane*, says, softly, as if still loath to break the subtle spell:

"*Allons, me fren', led us come yonder.*"

Passing through the shady and grass-grown churchyard, amid the fragrant flowers and shrubs which the sisters have planted wherever the rays of the sun, reaching down like amber fingers through the interstices of the branches, may impart a genial influence to their early blooms, we enter the chapel. The closed shutters of its stained windows lend a twilight gloom to the number of oak-carvings and time-stained decorations; and the cool atmosphere of comparative desuetude is in pleasing contrast to that shimmering ether which radiates over the plain in rippling undulations of fervid heat.

When the reverend father has passed on up to the altar, and I have almost unconsciously assumed a devotional attitude, a single voice from the choir begins the joyful notes of the "Gloria." Glancing up involuntarily, I discern through the half-light of the chapel the slender and symmetrical figure of the novice, Sister Athanasia, standing in the little organ-loft projecting from the side-wall. The perfect poise of her lithe figure, and the soft yet firm grasp of the

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white hand laid carelessly upon the railing before her, tell of the perfect health and vigorous life which tingle to the ends of her shapely fingers. No form in all the land matches that of the gentle Sister in its shapely curves, its delicate firmness, its plastic and willowy equipoise, its clearly-cut definition, wanting only the full complement of years to ripen into generous fruition. She seems, in her graceful perpendicularity, to have carried the full water-pitcher upon her head from earliest youth, and to have acquired the art of never spilling a drop, whatever unstudied attitude she assumes. Standing in the small organ-loft, the sombre drapery of her order clinging in soft folds to every curve of a figure whose exquisite outline the white and unsightly bands and facings strive in vain to destroy, the magnetism of her strong individuality seems to impart a share of her own rugged strength and buoyant vitality, her firm assurance and perfect repose, to every feeble worshiper within sight of her superior presence. No trace of weak supplication, of doubtful assurance, is there, but a half-defiant, assertive, triumphant, yet softened and chastened expression of joyous tranquillity. One instinctively thinks of the Magdalene, and how fondly the old painters clung to her story.

But Sister Athanasia's is a beautiful face, nevertheless, with a Greek contour and a rich brown complexion toned by the semitransparent pallor of the cloister. Even the shapeless covering which crowns her lovely head seems converted by her marvelous beauty of feature into a fitting adornment. And, as she sings, every trace of earthly feeling passes from her features, leaving only that rapt beatitude which the old masters loved to bestow upon the pleading countenance of the Madonna. It expresses in its delicate sensibility every varying emotion of the vesper-hymn: now tender and pathetic, now grave, now almost gay, now breathing its own resolute, self-contained spirit. What exquisite modulation of tone, what purity and clearness of diction! And yet through and above all run a perfect poise, a calm assurance, an undisturbed tranquillity. No nerve quivers, no muscle trembles, no subtle emotion breaks the equilibrium of frame, or mars the perfect rest of feature.

To me who know Sister Athanasia's past history—how the blood of savage chiefs runs in her veins; how, transferred from the tents to the cloister, she has carried the independence of her old, wild, roving existence through all the rigid training of an ascetic life; how, at times, the dominion of a fierce and ungovernable will temporarily usurps the better instincts of long years of culture, defying control, and laughing the conventual rules to scorn—to me her physical vigor and mental poise afford no sense of wonder. Those who wander through Nature's groves catch the Sabean odors in their dress, and afterward exhale the sweet perfume with every breath. For Sister Athanasia may be said to live two lives: the weaker, an outward compliance with the obligations and forms of the conventual order which, first adopting her, she for lack of better guardian afterward adopts; the stronger, the old

life, chafing under rigid discipline and constant restraint, and yearning for all that is free and roving in Nature—for the things of earth and air, for human passions and emotions, for something physical, tangible, real, for a sympathetic companionship, perchance for love. From this latter life spring her long walks across the plain at eventide, sandwiched between two working Sisters; her superabundant vitality, independent action, and frequent rebellions; the firm equilibrium of figure and assured bearing.

The firm, even chords of Sister Athanasia's voice sound clear and strong through the vespers in response to the monotonous sing-song of Father Geron. She stands, scarcely altering her position through the hour's service, like some antique statue of Nemesis, as clearly pronounced, as self-contained, as seemingly inevitable. The heat of the day brings, apparently, no sense of its warmth to her; she seems to rise above natural discomforts, as she does above the cramped surroundings in which she moves. When, later on, we have quitted the chapel and again pass through the shady churchyard, Father Geron shakes his head in comical dismay, as we watch her striding away with the mien of a tragedy-queen in the direction of the Sisters' residence; but, as the long twilight descends upon the plain, and we see the elastic figure of Sister Athanasia disappearing into the horizon, on one of her evening rambles, far in advance of the attending dragons, Sisters Propriety and Discretion, the good father's face lights up with a glow of pride in her vigorous life and supple freedom of limb, and he turns complacently to me with—

"Ah, me fren', you h'would nod confez to me, *mais* the moz rilligious man he h'would make de confez to de *Sœur Athanasie*, ain't id?"

The long summer months glide fervently by, and garrulous little Father Geron has departed on his accustomed itinerary to the Missions of the White Dog. Young Father Paul comes up from the seminary to recruit his slim figure in the bracing air of the Plains, and minister to the spiritual wants of the parish. He brings with him, besides his somewhat effeminate presence, the reputation of an ascetic, and a taste for natural history. Those who judge of the young priest's vitality by the slenderness of his figure are somewhat startled by the extent of his rambles, and the power of endurance he betrays. Beneath the loose folds of his ill-fitting *soutane* he conceals nerves of steel and muscles hardened by the severest exercise. A glance, too, at his pale face reveals to the spectator no trace of mental weakness. Father Paul's will is as strong, centric, and positive, as are the well-knit muscles of his slender frame. The negligent and improvident of the parish soon come to know this, and never seek to take advantage of his seeming infirmity but once. Every parochial duty is performed in due course and efficiently: the services at the little chapel recur regularly; the sick are visited, the penitents absolved; but no further intimacy with his flock is encouraged. The father wanders off upon the plain, or by the river-side, in search of his loved beetles

and rocks, or buries himself among his books. Father Geron's little study comes gradually to assume the aspect of a cabinet of curiosities: the walls are stabbed with innumerable pins bearing burdens of bright-hued butterflies, hideous coleoptera, and many-colored insects; the tables and shelves groan under their lading of stones and fossils. As a consequence, Father Paul's light gun and shooting-jacket come to be more frequently seen than his *soutane* and cane, and his slender but elegant figure and pale face take on a fuller habit and richer coloring.

When young Father Paul chants the mass of a Sunday in the little chapel, the whole parish pauses to listen. The full, ringing rhythm of his voice, and its clear diction, are in pleasing contrast to the unintelligible mumbling of the regular incumbent. There is, too, a grace of action, a smoothness of routine, and a reverence in his manner, that enhances the subtle spell of the service. I think even Sister Athanasia has fallen under its influence. The indifference she betrays at the first service merges into curiosity, then interest, as the weeks roll on. The old calm, equable poise of manner, and self-contained bearing, give place slowly to the play of the emotions; until the supple form, which stood in the organ-loft through the long service without fatigue, now seems to require frequent changes of posture. The beautiful head, which in its airy poise was vaguely suggestive of assertion, even defiance, now droops hesitatingly. A certain tremulousness of frame and suppliant posture have changed the self-contained Magdalene into a pleading Madonna. Even the expression of the beautiful face alters somewhat. The firm, assured glance of the eye gives place to a timid, evasive look, as if in dread of encountering a returning glance; the mobile lips quiver with a curious embarrassment, and take on an expression of unwonted indecision; even the color surges over the face without apparent control, and, after a burning blush, leaves its pallor supplemented by a whiter hue. I observe, too, that when Father Paul glances into the organ-loft, to note the beginning of her chant, her eyes fall beneath his, and her voice rises with a perceptible tremor of tone. The rugged strength, the firm assurance, the perfect poise of her manner, are gone, and in their stead comes a tender womanhood—the wistful attitude, the pleading glance, the pathos of tears. The emotional nature supplants the dominion of abundant vitality, and the typical woman emerges from the chrysalis.

The long walks in which Sister Athanasia was formerly wont to indulge are gradually discontinued. From passing Father Paul upon his rambles with a charming indifference to his existence, a sudden coyness seems to possess her, and she avoids such encounters. When inadvertently meeting him, the constraint of her manner and her eagerness to escape would suggest aversion, were it not for a certain lighting up of feature and the roseate hues upon her cheeks. In lieu of the evening rambles, she devotes herself to the care of flowers, flitting in and out among the beds of waving blossoms, herself the

fairest flower of them all; or sits musing at her window, gazing absently across the plain where Father Paul is making his collections. Indeed, the youthful *père* seems to have time and attention for nothing else; and it is a matter of doubt whether the changing manner and infrequent greeting of his fair chorister have even suggested themselves to him. He goes upon the even tenor of his way, after the strict discharge of his parish duties, without apparently noticing the changing lives about him. So it happens that his clear voice chants the vesper-hymn of a Sabbath with its usual firm, reliant, melodious notes, while Sister Athanasia's once assertive contralto becomes subject to fitful changes. The neglect of all those cheerful exercises which once ministered to her abundant vitality, and sent the tide of life in healthful currents through her veins, tells upon one whose rich physical nature has hitherto been the prime condition of her being.

As the summer months wear slowly on, the changed appearance of Sister Athanasia takes on a deeper hue. Standing in the organ-loft, the droop of her rounded figure seems more clearly defined, and the old firm grasp of her hand upon the rail has given place to an uncertain tenure. The rich color which so lately came and went beneath the damask of her cheek is supplanted by a permanent pallor; the full ripe lips have drawn more sharply over the mouth, as if to conceal some secret which she scarcely dare breathe to herself, but which, buried in the recesses of her bosom, cowers among the ruins of her peace. The eyes which, but a few weeks since, fell beneath the glance of the father, now seek his with a wistful, yearning tenderness in their luminous depths. How eagerly she watches every graceful motion of his well-knit frame, and drinks in every tone of his melodious voice! How she pours out her soul in the vesper-hymns, so simple, so touching, so plaintive, breathing forth such a soul of wretchedness, of hope, of fear, that every listener is mute and silent! And how wan and woe-begone she looks when the vespers close, and she turns away from the place where the poor heart has been cheated into a momentary forgetfulness of its bitterness!

In the early autumnal days the Mission of White-Horse Plains is alarmed by a threatened inroad of *Surcies*. Father Paul's nomadic parishioners warn him that, on his long rambles, his light gun and shooting-jacket may attract the fire of some lurking savage. But the youthful priest never for a moment pauses in his eager search for strange coleoptera and forgotten fossils. True, the extent of his wanderings is circumscribed somewhat; but the *soutane* never supplants the many-pocketed shooting-coat to tell the peaceful calling of its wearer.

One evening it comes to be known that Father Paul has started upon his usual quest, and the dim torchlight fails to note his return. The scared parishioners gather in a little knot by the chapel, and discuss in anxious tones his probable wanderings. Across the churchyard I observe the white bands of the Sisters, standing expectantly upon the veranda of their residence. The dusky night-shadows are rap-

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idly falling, blending all objects in a vague, indefi-
nite outline. Out upon the plain a faint, almost im-
perceptible thread of umber marks the horizon-line.
The evening wind sighs over the level expanse, bend-
ing the tall grasses with a mournful rustle ; and the
wild-birds pass and re-pass with plaintive cry over
the sedges which form their summer home. Sudden-
ly the outline of a man is projected into the gloom—
a man running with rapid and eager strides toward
the chapel. Straight in he comes with slowly-de-
creasing rapidity of footstep, his slender form thrown
forward, and the marks of exhaustion visible in his
flagging gait. As he nears the inclosure, a second
figure, more clearly cut, more sharply defined in its
semi-nudity, rises from the wild-grasses. A resonant
twang sweeps by on the night-wind, as the shadowy
form sinks back invisibly to the earth again ; the
swift runner pauses a moment in his rapid flight,
throws his arms wildly above his head, staggers fee-
bly, then falls upon his face to the ground. The
long grasses close over his form, shimmering and
bending beneath the breeze, and inexplicable lone-
liness again broods over the plain.

The little knot of parishioners, dazed by the sud-
den spectacle, regard each other in a stunned way
devoid of vocal expression. They are scarcely con-

scious of the flitting of a woman's form across the
churchyard and out through the long herbage of the
plain—a form which throws itself wildly upon that
other shadowy outline lying upon the dank grass,
calling upon it in tender tones, caressing it with fond
touches. How it pleads for its love ! With what a
yearning tenderness it pillows the pale face upon its
bosom, and calls upon the fainting spirit to return to
life, to love ! What a pathos is there in the soft
hands parting the hair from the damp brow, and
what infinite affection in the luminous eyes ! How
she wraps the slender form in her strong arms, and
showers kisses upon the pale lips ! What a depth
of misery in the plaintive wail that her love is dead !
What a joyous, triumphant hope upon her glorious
face when returning life flickers up through the ash-
en death-hues !

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My lord the bishop comes up the next day from
the episcopal palace, and Father Paul is carried away
to be nursed back to life and vigor. A light wagon,
with an appropriate cover of inky blackness, and
convoys by stern old Father Antoine and the two
dragons, journeys with Sister Athanasia toward the
Convent of the Sacred Heart.